

graduation 1984

Commencement Address

New College of the University of South Florida

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I thought a lot about what I could say to you and there are a lot of interesting questions but there only is really one thing I can speak to you about with any authority. So let's suppose that we have a three manifold which is atroidal and aspherical and suppose also that it has a finite grope action on it. And now since New College isn't about authority let's take it and put it over here on the shelf.

Next September will have been 20 years since I arrived in Sarasota along with the 100 other members of the charter class. It's really hard to believe that it's been 20 years. It doesn't seem like 20 years. It seems like a short time. I still feel like a student. In fact when I run into people on the streets in Princeton they ask me where I am and I say I'm at Princeton and they say are you a graduate or an undergraduate. I still feel like a student in a lot of ways.

So, 20 years ago we arrived in town. I came down on the train from Washington. It was a long ride. It took 27 hours and I came down alone. I'd never been in the South. I'd never been in Florida, certainly. And not in Sarasota.

It's sort of amazing thinking back and wondering why I came here. Because, what did I have to go on? We got some literature in the mail.

The literature we got was really amazing. I guess what I was really impressed by was the statements of educational principles in the literature. To me it kind of read like the Declaration of Independence, a little bit. It was sort of freedom from all this stupidity of school that I rebelled against all of my life.

I went to kindergarten in Holland, in a Montessorri kindergarten. Their style was sort of Montessori, their interpretation. I came back to the United States and just thought that the way we were being taught was wrong. In grade school I didn't really get along real well. I got Cs in arithmetic, Ds in Social Studies, and certainly Ds in handwriting. I just didn't adapt. I maybe was thinking about other things on my own. Sort of daydreaming in school. Somehow I didn't fit in.

In junior high school it was somewhat better, but I rebelled a bit more. I used to get in big fights with my teachers about things that really, maybe, they should have known like whether the moon goes around the earth or not. But, it was very traumatic for me. Because somehow the teacher was in the position of authority and it just wasn't appropriate for the teacher to be wrong. It wasn't appropriate for the teacher to get anything from the students. Just because I happened to have read some astronomy books, it didn't mean that I should speak up in science class and say that the phases of the moon are caused by the way the sun shines on it and not that the earth's shadow falls on the moon.

In high school I guess I adapted fairly well, eventually. I got good grades but I thought it was stupid. Well, for instance, for my Latin class I wrote a cynical sort of pamphlet on how to get good grades in Latin. It was very effective though. We had to recite our lesson every day. We had to do a certain translation and I couldn't quite do it on the

spur of the moment if I hadn't thought about it, which I often hadn't. There were certain techniques of asking questions which one knew would be of interest to the Latin teacher. She could start talking about Roman culture and so forth, which was quite interesting.

There were certain techniques I sort of developed. I felt very skeptical and very cynical about education from high school, as a lot of people do. A lot of people kind of react to it by withdrawing. I didn't withdraw, but I felt very cynical. Then I started looking at college literature and it was for the most part depressing. It looked like a continuation of high school. I really didn't want to go someplace that had all these kind of uniform requirements, uniformity imposed by necessity of grading people. I really thought people should get their education as individuals.

Then, finally, a lot advertising for New College. In the beginning it was through the National Merit Semi-finalists. I got a brochure from them and it was really like a lantern in the darkness, somehow. These principles - "In the final analysis each person is responsible for her or his own education." They were a little more archaic in those days. - "The best education comes from the active confrontation of two first class minds." In all the ^{corollaries} ~~correlaries~~ of it, it was just nicely set forth.

Of course, this literature was a tremendous job of salesmanship, too. New College was to be the best in every way, not just in terms of academic excellence. Everybody's ideas were there. It was going to have all the authority too, as well as a good way of operating. The literature began, "Our first faculty appointment is Arnold Toynbee, the world renowned historian." They didn't quite tell us that he would be there as a visitor

for three months, which was quite wonderful, but it wasn't actually a central part of New College.

Then there were pictures of the dormitories. "Our dormitories are designed by world famous architect, I.M. Pei." They had beautiful models. They didn't mention at the bottom that the dormitories weren't complete yet.

My parents just let me kind of pick my college on my own. I'm not sure what gave them the wisdom to do this or foolishness, whichever it was. Probably foolishness. I was really shocked once when a kind of friend of the family who was well respected for his practical sense was talking to me about where I was going to go to college. I showed him this literature and he looked through it and then he looked at me and said "You're taking a big risk," and that's true I was. I rationalized it to myself by thinking that if this is a fraud, which it was, then the perpetrators of this fraud deserve to get the fruits of their labor. New College was just kind of an idea that people were really dedicated to.

I was really feeling a great sense of suspense when I arrived at New College in Sarasota. I really didn't know whether it would be here. But we arrived and we got taken out to Lido Key. You know about a lot of this. We got put up in a fine hotel - what used to be called the Landmark Hotel. It turned into the Aku Tiki Hotel. It is now surrounded by condominiums. As part of my research I felt the need to go out there yesterday afternoon and investigate the beaches there. The beach still is beautiful, white and sandy. The hotel is desolate, boarded up. This lot is going to be turned into the convention hotel sponsored by Burt Reynolds. A really kind of sad piece of my past vanishing.

Finally at the end of the year we moved into the dorms.

Other than that, it was fine. We had all these famous outside speakers. We had this tremendous glow and aura. We were really going to be the ones to show the world. Then around Christmas time the president told us that - well certain things began to happen - our dormitories still weren't quite finished and New College couldn't quite afford to keep us in the Landmark Hotel anymore. There was a horse stable on the property of the college. They rapidly converted it into a barracks style housing for the 60 men. Double bunks, three feet between them. They got some old saggy mattresses and so forth. They fixed it up good. It's still there, the Barn. It's hard to imagine 60 people living there. The women got put in the science lab. The science lab got put in the bay or someplace.

We came back. The dean was fired. It was a big shock. Not that we respected him. We mistrusted the Dean ahead of time as a sort of representative of authority which we didn't believe in. But after he was fired we believed in him. There was big controversy. All sorts of controversy. It was really an amazing time that I can't describe - roller coaster - Somehow we adapted.

I adapted to the barn. I went to the hardware store and bought a sheet of polyethelene and I took it down here into the wooded area where nobody goes because it's all brambly. I camped out there for three months. Some of the time when the bugs and the cold got to me I had a little game I played with the security guard. He was real friendly. He was kind of proud of his professionalism and so forth. So I made a deal with him. If I could hide in the Ringling House, which is now the Library, and if I could hide well enough that he couldn't find me I could stay there. I thought of some very ingenious hiding places. It was a wonderful game. Finally at the end of the year we moved into the dorms.

Somehow, through this it was really amazing, the academics really kept up, in some way. A lot of other things changed. When we first came one of the expectations and one of the realities was that we wore coats and ties and skirts to dinner. We were all little ladies and gentlemen. That rapidly dissolved when we moved to the barn. There was a lot of turmoil.

I have a nice quote here from the Catalyst which is the early paper. We were very concerned about community relations and we were shocked at the kind of letters that sometimes were written in by the community. Here's this letter that we all reacted to. "At a recent meeting a group of so called students from New College were in the audience. It was a shocking sight. The contrast between ^{these} misfits and the neat clean cut young men and women at Manatee Junior College was striking. This gang looked like they had been imported from some far out beatnik joint in Greenwich Village." And it goes on and on. "It was from New College that three students hitchhiked to Alabama to participate in the recent civil rights disorder and got themselves thrown in jail when refusing to get up off the sidewalk when ordered by a police officer." My wife, by the way (Rachel Findlay) was one of those people. "Upon being released they came back to New College and bragged about how proud they were to be jailbirds. Apparently they have not yet been expelled for their actions. If these students represent the best New College can attract then I for one suggest that Manatee and Sarasota Counties would be better off if the whole kit and kaboodle were loaded onto an appropriate vehicle, in this case a garbage scow, and hauled to the middle of the Gulf of Mexico and sunk."

This didn't exactly fit our self-image. We were very concerned with this kind of thing. Then, of course, at the end of the year the whole faculty resigned. Not the whole faculty, there are some still here. For

instance, Prof. Berggren, who we all had to take many courses from because we had a core curriculum. I hear all these groans. I don't think that is the essential feature, I think that is the wrong thing to pick on. Any way the whole Nat. Sci. division resigned and we got a whole new batch of people. Somehow the faculty were all extremely dedicated to the idea of education and this experiment in education. It was amazing that half of them could vanish and then a new batch of very dedicated people came in.

We students somehow stayed. Most of us stayed. We felt a little bit abandoned by some of the faculty we had come to respect. Really, I guess their security was much more threatened than ours. When the president announces to you in the faculty meeting that he doesn't know where the next month's pay check is going to come from - sort of makes you think, I guess.

New College has been through many changes. It was a real roller coaster ride in terms of all these things when I was a student and it's been a roller coaster ride through the years too. There have been other crises. It has been absorbed by USF. At that time a lot of our charter class began to think that maybe that it was really going to go to the dogs and maybe they just stopped caring about it. It's hard to keep caring about a place for so long.

For me it's been really refreshing to come back here and to see that despite all these changes of formalities, for instance, we didn't have a contract system. We had the core curriculums, which has a certain point in sort of uniting the group of students. When we came it was the most expensive school in the country. They awarded generous fellowships. Not that our parents thought they were generous enough. The tuition, room and board was \$3900. It was a lot of money 20 years ago. It is still plenty

of money. Now New College is one of the really best bargains in terms of money anyplace. That is not the point though. I approve of it being a good bargain. It is really kind of shameful that money is a barrier to education for people. But the money is not what is important. In the long run it is the education that's important. It is the things you learn.

I went to graduate school. There I realized how much we had all somehow changed. Because it was really like going back to high school. In elementary graduate classes the students sat there in front of the lecturer with great respect for the authority. When they didn't understand him they whispered at each other. They wouldn't ask the instructor. That wasn't thought of and they just seemed, somehow, so immature.

As Bob Benedetti mentioned I did try to find out how the students had reacted to the three years. We were a three year school then. Another one of the superficial differences. There never was a seminar but I did talk to a lot of people like me who felt they sort of stayed upright through all of the storms and roller coasters and so forth. There were plenty of people who were totally out of it for at least a year. All kinds of reactions to an environment like this. Even the people who hadn't been working for some of the time felt that they'd really matured. That they had somehow really learned what was important to them. That is what you have to keep in mind. What's important to you. You have to think for yourself. That's one thing we really learned in those days.

We learned the myth of grownups. The existence of grownups. There were grownups when we were children who held our hand when we crossed the street. Our tendency was to think that there were still grownups who would look out for us if we got into trouble and we really learned at New College

that we couldn't rely on the grownups. The authorities, that is. Some of the authorities had wisdom, some didn't.

We really had to look out for ourselves. Hold on during the roller coaster ride. Try to see through the haze. It goes by much faster than you would like. There's a difference though, because there is no safety engineer. There is nobody doing inspection on the tracks. Another difference is that there are certain branch points. Sometimes they come up very fast. It's hard to see what is this way and what is that way. You can't see. But you have to try to see. You have to think about the whole of your life, the whole of the world. What's it all for?

For me, professionally as a mathematician I have succeeded. But it doesn't mean that I have succeeded in all ways. I had the goals for myself. I was determined that when I was 30 I would quit mathematics and I would go back to some of my real interests which were what I did in Independent Study Projects. I wanted to learn - incredible Independent Study Projects. My first Independent Study Project was called "Language and Perception." It's hard to imagine how people had enough faith in me to let me do this project. I wanted to really understand how language works from sort of the first principles instead of saying well here's a noun, here's a verb, here's an adjective, this language came from this language. Why does language work the way we do. My second Independent Study Project was "Thinking." I wanted to really understand what thinking is. These things were very important to me. It's hard to imagine how somebody else could understand that from the sophomore output I produced.

Anyway. Hold on.